

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Health Care Reform

July 15, 2009

Hello, everybody. Good afternoon. I am pleased to be joined by not only some of my former colleagues and outstanding legislators, but also by nurses. And I think I've said this before: I really like nurses. [*Laughter*] And so to have them here today on behalf of such a critical issue at a critical time is extraordinary.

Let me introduce a few of them. We've got Becky Patton, who's the president of the American Nurses Association here. Raise your hand, Becky. We have Dr. Mary Wakefield, who's a nurse and happens to be the Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration at HHS, our highest ranking nurse in the administration. We've got Keisha Walker, an RN, currently a senior research nurse at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. We have Dr. Rebecca Wiseman, nurse and assistant professor of adult health at the University of Maryland School of Nursing. And I'm also joined by Representative Johnson, Representative Capps, Representative McCarthy, Chairman George Miller, and my friend Chris Dodd.

I am very pleased to be joined today by the representatives from the American Nurses Association on behalf of 2.9 million registered nurses in America, men and women who know as well as anyone the urgent need for health reform.

Now, as I said before, I have a longstanding bias towards nurses. When Sasha, our younger daughter, was diagnosed with a dangerous case of meningitis when she was just 3 months old, we were terrified. And we were appreciative of the doctors, but it was the nurses who walked us through the entire process to make sure that Sasha was okay.

When both my daughters were born, the obstetrician was one of our best friends, but we saw her for about 10 minutes in each delivery. The rest of the time what we saw were nurses who did an incredible amount of work in not only taking care of Michelle but also caring for a nervous husband and then later for a couple of fat little babies.

So I know how important nurses are, and the Nation does too. Nurses aren't in health care to get rich. Last I checked, they're in it to care for all of us, from the time they bring a new life into this world to the moment they ease the pain of those who pass from it. If it weren't for nurses, many Americans in underserved and rural areas would have no access to health care at all.

And that's why it's safe to say that few understand why we have to pass reform as intimately as our Nation's nurses. They see firsthand the heartbreaking costs of our health care crisis. They hear the same stories that I've heard across this country—of treatment deferred or coverage denied by insurance companies; of insurance premiums and prescriptions that are so expensive they consume a family's entire budget; of Americans forced to use the emergency room for something as simple as a sore throat just because they can't afford to see a doctor.

And they understand that this is a problem that we can no longer defer. We can't kick the can down the road any longer. Deferring reform is nothing more than defending the status quo. And those who would oppose our efforts should take a hard look at just what it is that they're defending. Over the last decade, health insurance premiums have risen three times faster than wages. Deductibles and out-of-pocket costs are skyrocketing. And every single day

we wait to act, thousands of Americans lose their insurance, some turning to nurses in emergency rooms as their only recourse.

So make no mistake, the status quo on health care is not an option for the United States of America. It's threatening the financial stability of families, of businesses, and of government. It's unsustainable, and it has to change.

I know a lot of Americans who are satisfied with their health care right now are wondering what reform would mean for them, so let me be clear: If you like your doctor or health care provider, you can keep them. If you like your health care plan, you can keep that too.

But here's what else reform will mean for you—and this is for people who have health insurance: You will save money. If you lose your job, change your job, or start a new business, you'll still be able to find quality health insurance that you can afford. If you have a preexisting medical condition, no insurance company will be able to deny you coverage. You won't have to worry about being priced out of the market. You won't have to worry about one illness leading your family into financial ruin. That's what reform means, not just for the uninsured but for the people who have health insurance right now.

And the naysayers and the cynics still doubt that we can do this. But it wasn't too long ago that those same naysayers doubted that we'd be able to make real progress on health care reform. And thanks to the work of key committees in Congress, we're now closer to the goal of health reform than we have ever been.

Yesterday the House introduced its health reform proposal. Today, thanks to the unyielding passion and inspiration of our friend Ted Kennedy and to the bold leadership of Senator Chris Dodd, the Senate HELP Committee reached a major milestone by passing a similarly strong proposal for health reform. It's a plan that was debated for more than 50 hours and that, by the way, includes 160 Republican amendments, a hopeful sign of bipartisan support for the final product, if people are serious about bipartisanship.

Both proposals will take what's best about our system today and make it the basis for our system tomorrow, reducing costs, raising quality, and ensuring fair treatment of consumers by the insurance industry. Both include a health insurance exchange, a marketplace that will allow families and small businesses to compare prices, services, and the quality, so they can choose the plan that best suits their needs. And among the choices available would be a public health insurance option that would make health care more affordable by increasing competition, providing more choices, and keeping insurance companies honest. Both proposals will offer stability and security to Americans who have coverage today and affordable options to those who don't.

Now, this progress should make us hopeful, but it can't make us complacent. It should instead provide the urgency for both the House and the Senate to finish their critical work on health reform before the August recess.

America's nurses need us to succeed, not just on behalf of the patients that they sometimes speak for. If we invest in prevention, nurses won't have to treat diseases or complications that could have been avoided. If we modernize health records, we'll streamline the paperwork that can take up more than one-third of the average nurse's day, freeing them to spend more time with their patients. If we make their jobs a little bit easier, we can attract and train the young nurses we need to make up a nursing shortage that's only getting worse. Nurses do their part every time they check another healthy patient out of the hospital. It's now time for us to do our part.

Now, I just want to be clear: We are going to get this done. Becky and I were talking in the Oval Office. And Becky just pointed out we need to buck up people a little bit here. [Laughter] And that's what nurses do all the time. They buck up patients, sometimes they buck up some young resident who doesn't quite know what they're doing. [Laughter] You look at Becky, you can tell she knows what she's doing. And what she's saying is it's time for us to buck up—Congress, this administration, the entire Federal Government—to be clear that we've got to get this done.

Our nurses are on board. The American people are on board. It's now up to us. We can do what we've done for so long and defer tough decisions for another day, or we can step up and meet our responsibilities. In other words, we can lead. We can look beyond the next news cycle and the next election to the next generation and come together to build a system that works not just for these nurses, but for the patients they care for, for doctors and hospitals, for families and businesses, and for our very future as a nation.

I'm confident it's going to get done because we've got a great team behind us. And we are going to be continually talking about this for the next 2 to 3 weeks until we've got a bill off the Senate and we've got a bill out of the House. Then we'll deserve a few weeks rest before we come back and finally get a bill done so we can sign it right here in the Rose Garden.

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:11 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Health care reform.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Blanchard, Anita; Capps, Lois; Dodd, Christopher J.; Johnson, Eddie Bernice; Kennedy, Edward M.; McCarthy, Carolyn; Miller, George; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Patton, Rebecca M. ; Patton, Rebecca M.; Wakefield, Mary ; Walker, Keisha ; Wiseman, Rebecca.

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